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Dr. Godfrey

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The Representation of Black Masculinity in *Hero for Hire #1*

Hero for Hire #1 is often touted as a progressive step for the representation of African-Americans in comics. An examination regarding the origin of how Cage received his superpowers and why he chooses to charge for his heroic services construct the major plot points of the story. Cage's conviction of a crime he did not commit causes him to escape from prison, eventually prompting his relocation to Seagate (a maximum security prison). In an attempt at freedom, Cage agrees to partake in a scientific experiment but a guard with a grudge sabotages it, providing Cage with his powers. The major beats of this story relate back to the techniques employed in the blaxploitation genre with negative stereotypes of African-Americans retooled as strengths used to combat a corrupt and dismissive society. While there are elements of negative stereotypes occurring in any blaxploitation story, *Hero for Hire #1* is usually seen as a move toward the inclusion of African-American males in comics and a more positive portrayal of African-American masculinity. However, the story as stated is not the sole focus of the comic. Taking a page from its periodical roots, comics include a series of advertisements interspersed with the main content. Multiple times throughout the comic, images of Cage acting in a brutish manner or suffering abuse by a white man contrast with advertisements of white men enjoying success. The juxtaposition between images of African-American and white masculinity create a dichotomy that devalues the supposed progressive message of Luke Cage as one of the inaugural

African-American superheroes, instead further supporting the stigmatized representation of African-American masculinity in society.

Before moving on to the beginning of the argument, I recognize the merit of using advertisements as part of a text to support the presented claims can be argued against. The advertisements bear no weight on the progression of the narrative. However, studying only the story of Luke Cage while ignoring the advertisements would be similar to reading a reprint or scan of the comic. The inclusion of advertisements (i.e. the exact advertisements that were in the original printing) would be most likely not occur “[erasing] the original historicized meaning” of the text (Bornstein 31). Why would the paratextual material not be acceptable in reprints or scans? Losing said material would result in a misunderstanding of the societal ideals that could have lead to the paratextual construction, and original meaning, of the text. It is imperative that the advertisements are accounted for when analyzing the introduction of Luke Cage. Said advertisements provide invaluable historical context that is vital in understanding the character as any representation of the same comic is. All versions are capable of “[modifying] contemporary constructions of meaning” (Bornstein 31) but to gain a proper historical context, the original comic with the advertisements must count.

Aspects of Cage’s characterization are based on past racial stereotypes (such the brute) of African-American men, however, the reappropriative nature of the blaxploitation genre supposedly subverts those negative stereotypical characteristics in an attempt to provide strength to the character, positively affecting their life. The elements that constructed past racial stereotypes, which tainted the representation of African-American masculinity, are supposedly reworked to craft a positive portrayal of African-American men. To better understand the

negative depiction of Cage when compared to aspects of positive white masculinity, negating the purpose of utilizing blaxploitation tropes, an examination of the antiquated stereotypes that Cage falls victim to is needed. Therefore, by examining the shift in the depiction of masculinity in the United States during the 20th century a clearer picture forms regarding the use of Cage to negatively portray African-American masculinity.

The inspiration for Cage's character stems from the depiction of African-American men in blaxploitation media. A reappropriation of negative stereotypes concerning African-Americans defending "the black communities and the ghetto streets that they lived in fighting against crooked cops, mobsters, and other street criminals," were some of the major components that constructed the genre (Lendrum 386). While the use of reappropriated stereotypes as being a successful way to depict the African-American community has been a contested subject, the genre as a whole has allowed for a greater focus on African-American individuals to be the hero instead of a supporting character (Lendrum 368). Therefore, the inclusion of a Cage as the first leading African-American superhero in comics, despite the possible negative connotations that could follow conventions of the blaxploitation genre, would generally be viewed as progressive for the medium of comic books.

As mentioned earlier, the portrayal of Luke Cage, when examined in conjunction with the advertisements, is similar to the negative "brute" stereotype. The purpose of stereotyping African-American masculinity serves "to limit the movement of black men into social positions of importance, influence, and power, [as] black male agency needed to be defined as threatening," (Morris 79). While this negative societal representation of African-Americans further developed during slavery, the stereotypes of African-American men have shifted over the

past two centuries based on the needs of white masculinity. As society began to move toward becoming “commerce [based with a focus on] industrialization, a normative masculinity was needed that valued intellect and emotional control over physical strength,” (Morris 81). The view of African-American men went from “docile [and] ready to serve [to] brutes harboring a ready anger that threatened at any minute to erupt as violence against [white society]” (Morris 79). Thus, regardless of the intention, it is disconcerting to have Luke Cage be, during the beginning of the comic, presented as both physically imposing yet still powerless against white masculinity. The advertisement, titled “The Insult that Made a Man out of ‘Mac’”, (see fig. 1), before page four of *Hero for Hire #1*, is in the form of a comic and promotes a “free book” by Charles Atlas that will “give [the bullied character] a real body.” Every character in the advertisement is white and only with a small amount of effort the downtrodden character that gained a ridiculous amount of muscle “later” (no mention of an excessive passage of time occurs between panels) defeats his bully. White masculinity is presented as the only power that can counteract itself. On the subsequent page (see fig. 2) Cage is treated in a dismissive manner by Captain Rackham and shoved around by the white guards. Despite the attempt at presenting African-American masculinity as dangerous, white masculinity is presented as being superior despite the paradoxical nature of displaying the presented physicality of African-American men as negative; it is being established that white masculinity is on the whole “better” than African-American masculinity.

THE INSULT THAT MADE A MAN OUT OF "MAC"

HEY! QUIT KNOCKING THAT SAND IN OUR FACES!

THAT MAN IS THE WORST NUISANCE ON THE BEACH

LISTEN HERE. I'D SPASH YOUR FACE—ONLY YOU'RE SO BUNNY YOU MIGHT DRY UP AND BLOW AWAY!

THE BIG BULLY! I'LL GET EVEN SOME DAY!

OH DON'T LET IT BOTHER YOU LITTLE BOY!

OH! I'M SICK AND TIRED OF BEING A SCARECROW! CHARLES ATLAS SAYS HE CAN GIVE ME A REAL BODY. ALL RIGHT! I'LL GAMBLE A STRIP AND GET HIS FREE BOOK!

BOY! IT DIDN'T TAKE ATLAS LONG TO DO THIS FOR ME! WHAT MUSCLES! THAT BULLY WON'T SHOVE ME AROUND AGAIN!

LATER

WHAT? YOU HERE AGAIN? HERE'S SOMETHING I OWE YOU!

OH, MAC! YOU ARE A REAL MAN AFTER ALL!

HERO OF THE BEACH

GOSH! WHAT A BUILD!

HE'S ALREADY FAMOUS FOR IT!

Charles Atlas

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU A NEW MAN!

ARE you "fed up" with seeing the bookies walk off with the best of everything? Sick and tired of being soft, frail, skinny or flabby — only **HALF ALIVE!** I know just how you feel. Because I myself was once a puny 90-pound "runt." And I was so ashamed of my scrawny frame that I dreaded being seen in a swim suit.

The Secret of How I Got My Build

Then I discovered a wonderful way to develop my body fast. It worked wonders for me — changed me from the scrawny "runt" I was at 21, into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And I can build up YOUR body the **very** same natural way — without weights, springs or pulleys. Only 15 minutes a day of pleasant practice — in the privacy of your room.

My "Dynamic-Tension" method has already helped thousands of other fellows become real he-men in double-

quick time. Let it help YOU. Not next month or next year — but **RIGHT NOW!**

"Dynamic-Tension"
Builds Muscles FAST!

If you're like I was, you want a powerful, muscular, well-proportioned build you can be proud of any time anywhere. You want the "Gresle-Gel" type of physique that women rave about at the beach — the kind that makes other fellows green with envy.

Mail Coupon Now for My 32-Page Illustrated Book

Mailing the coupon can be the turning point in your life. I'll send you a copy of my 32-page illustrated book, "How Dynamic-Tension Makes You a NEW MAN!" Tells how and why my method works! Shows many pictures proving what I say does for others. Don't delay! Mail coupon **NOW**. **CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 600** 115 E. 23rd St., New York, N.Y. 10010.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 600
115 East 23rd St., New York, N.Y. 10010

Please, Charles Atlas, show me how to build a body of my own!

(Check as many as you like)

<input type="checkbox"/> Broader Chest and Shoulders	<input type="checkbox"/> More Energy and Stamina
<input type="checkbox"/> Harder Stomach Muscles	<input type="checkbox"/> More Muscular Personality
<input type="checkbox"/> Thicker Legs	<input type="checkbox"/> More Weight, Size — in
<input type="checkbox"/> Stronger Waist and Loin	<input type="checkbox"/> The Right Frame

I enclose \$10. Please send me a copy of your famous book showing how "Dynamic-Tension" can make me a new man. 10 Pages, illustrated with photographs, answers to 100 health questions, and reliable advice. This does not obligate me in any way.

Name: _____ Age: _____

Address: _____

City & State: _____

In England: Charles Atlas, 83 Piccadilly, London, W.1

Fig. 1

This comic styled advertisement presents "Mac" becoming physically strong and overcoming hardship, contrasted with the next image where the supposedly strong Cage is harassed by white men.



Fig. 2
Cage being harassed by white guards.

African-American masculinity, despite the excessive representation of their physicality to present white masculinity in a more positive light, is further presented as inferior against any form of white masculinity in *Hero for Hire #1*. On page five of the comic Cage is paying the price for resisting to work with Rackham. Quirt, a guard, is assaulting Cage by providing false reasons such as Cage being a “stir-crazy punk” who is trying to “[make] a move” at him (Goodwin, et al. 5, see fig. 3). Despite the presentation of Cage as more physically imposing than Quirt, he is still powerless to resist his beatings. The advertisement on the next page achieves a similar effect as the first one. Again when Cage is in a compromising position, the juxtaposition of the image with Arnold Schwarzenegger supporting a muscle enhancement program while holding a white female model (*Hero for Hire #1* back of page 6, see fig. 4) provides another positive image of white masculinity occurring next to an instance of weakness for Cage. The dichotomy present between the two images further separates the spheres of African-American masculinity and white masculinity. The one area in which African-American masculinity “succeeds” over white men fails with the representation of Cage when directly compared to the image of a successful, strong white individual. Said images do not assist in progressing the image of African-American masculinity but rather feeds into a then-contemporary reworking of a negative image of African-American masculinity.



Fig. 3
Cage is being physically beaten by a white guard.

**I put 2 full inches on my arms—
3 inches on my chest and trimmed
4 inches off my waist
in just 7 weeks...**

thanks to the Joe Weider
Musclebuilding Course!

WHY NOT YOU?

**SAYS MOVIE AND T.V. STAR,
ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER.**
"Mr. Universe" winner. He
believes you, too, can easily
duplicate his musclebuilding
success with the Weider Course.

**FREE!
BIG
MUSCLE-
BUILDING
BOOK!**

MAIL THIS COUPON TO ME TO-
DAY AND I'LL RUSH YOU MY
NEW BIG 32-PAGE ILLUSTRATED
BOOK—FREE! It's jam-packed
with proof that you can become
an athletic, virile, "Take-Charge" in-
dividual in just 7 weeks—or less! It's
loaded with photos, tips, suggestions
that will help make your fondest mus-
clebuilding dreams come true—just as
it did for Arnold Schwarzenegger and
over 2,500,000 other successful "Mu-
scle" men! SEND FOR IT NOW—IT'S ABSO-
LUTELY FREE!

JOE WEIDER
is your Personal Trainer!
He has trained almost
every "Mr. America", "Mr.
Universe", "Mr. Canada",
participated in 100+ contests
winning 100+ titles and over
2,000,000 spectators
gazes the world over!
The other instructors in history can come
close to this fantastic record!

HERE'S LIVING PROOF HOW FAST MY COURSE WORKS!

... IN ONLY 14 DAYS

BEFORE **AFTER**

HE GAINS 15 POUNDS!
LARRY, former lean, fit, fit,
week-end "body-builder" who
wasn't getting anywhere in his
efforts. After using Weider
methods and in just 14 days
put on 15 pounds, 20" on his
arms and 20" on his chest!
**IT CAN HAPPEN
TO YOU, TOO!**

... IN ONLY 30 DAYS

BEFORE **AFTER**

HE GAINS 25 LBS!
GARY, former 170 lbs. with
"soft" muscles and a shallow
chest. He gained 25 lbs. and
20" on his chest in 30 days.
After using Weider methods and gained 25
pounds, 20" on his chest,
20" on his arms,
20" on his chest!
WHY NOT YOU?

THE STRONGEST, MOST VIRILE AND ADMIRABLE MEN ARE BUILT BY THE WEIDER SYSTEM—FAST!

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR FREE BOOK

JOE WEIDER
Dept. 63-43 A
25 Maple Street
Norwood, N.J. 07648

Dear Joe: Okay, send it to me! Rush me
your free musclebuilding information and
free "Muscle Up" book that I can use
right away to build a handsome man "Take-
Charge" body—in just 7 short weeks—in
the privacy of my own home. I'm enclosing
25¢ to cover mailing and handling costs.
I'm under no further obligation.

NAME (please print clearly) AGE _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

**YOU'RE UNDER NO OBLIGATION
— NOTHING TO BUY!**

Fig. 4

A positive physical representation of white masculinity.

The hyper-physical representation of Cage, his super strength, and extreme durability is a response to both the character's origins based on tropes within the blaxploitation genre and the reappropriation of the negative “brute” stereotype regarding African-American men. Yet, instead of resisting the negative antiquated stereotype, Cage becomes a hyper-stereotype himself. Cage’s brute strength and apparent lack of intelligence become the antithesis of the traditional “Captain America” type of superhero. According to Robert Lendrum, “Cage is stereotyped the most” (368) when compared to other African-American male superheroes of the 1970s. Before Cage gained his powers, his “morality is conflated with the survivalist ethic of the black criminal known as the ‘hustler’,” (Lendrum 368) and yet the event that makes him beyond human, a character who should be a bastion of positive social values, moves in the opposite direction when studying the comparison of Cage's representation to the depiction of white men in the comic. Take the events surrounding Cage receiving his powers: Luke Cage is an unintelligent African-American who was wrongly convicted and must suffer the injustices of the United States criminal system despite the fact that Cage regularly participated in criminal activity before his arrest. Even though Cage is the hero, it is established that Cage is just a stereotype. In an attempt to “hustle” his way out of prison, Cage agrees to take part in an experiment he knows nothing about. Captain Rackham causes a catastrophic accident as revenge against Cage causing him to gain his powers. Cage breaks free of the machine in a dramatic fashion and while completely nude, knocks Rockham out (Goodwin, et al. 12, see fig. 5). According to Lendrum, “technology is considered oppressive and in opposition to the physical world that the black man inhabits,” (366) and Cage breaks free of this oppression by only exaggerating the negative image. The physicality of Cage’s being is on full display in these panels as he becomes a hyper-stereotype of

the “brute”. Consequently, the advertisement on the very next page (*Hero for Hire #1* back of page 13, see fig. 6) displays a white man working as an architectural “drafter” advertising the success white masculinity can achieve through their “higher intellect” when compared to the extremely negative representation of intelligence regarding the intelligence of African-American men. The stark contrast between Cage at his most brutish with the image of success of white masculinity due to the artificially inflated gap in intelligence between African-Americans and white individuals cements Cage as a hyper-stereotype that fails to progress the perception of African-American masculinity.

Luke Cage, the first African-American mainstream superhero headliner, through the combination of how he represented African-American masculinity and the positive advertisements with white men further serves a stereotypical image of African-American men and escalates the representation of white masculinity. The representation of Luke Cage in his inaugural work is a promotion of negative stereotypes regarding African-American despite the basis of the work on the blaxploitation genre. Cage’s attempt at freedom, unfortunately, restrict him even further and offers a negative image regarding African-American masculinity.



Fig. 5

Cage utilizing his hyper-physicality to overcome white masculinity and technological restraints.

THESE 3 BIG DRAFTING KITS* GIVEN TO YOU!

...when you train at home with NASD for a **HIGH PAY JOB IN DRAFTING!**

Take Your Pick of 2 EXCITING FIELDS

① Architectural Drafting
Today's population explosion guarantees boom in building of homes, churches, schools, factories, office buildings & warehouses is just starting. Thousands Architectural Draftsmen needed NOW because drawings must be made of every part of every building before ground can be broken.

② Mechanical Drafting
Skyrocketing U.S. mass production requires millions of drawings & thousands of Mechanical Draftsmen all along the way. Drawings must be made of every PART of every product used in the U.S. (as well as of the machines that make these parts) before production can be started.

U.S. LABOR DEPT. REPORTS SERIOUS SHORTAGE OF DRAFTSMEN
(The following quotes from U.S. Labor Dept. point out nationwide shortage for Draftsmen.)
"The dearth of qualified applicants has resulted in increasing calls for trainees, as employers in many areas relaxed hiring specifications. Experience requirements have been virtually eliminated, along with age barriers."
"Steadily growing employer requirements...were accompanied by marked reductions in the supply of draftsmen available."

TOP AMERICAN EMPLOYERS WELCOME NASD GRADUATES
"We would be interested in interviewing your sons as potential employees." **REMINGTON**
"At the present time we have several openings available for qualified Draftsmen. I look forward to considering graduates of your institution." **WESTINGHOUSE**
"We have immediate openings for designers and Draftsmen and have a definite interest in interviewing candidates immediately." **AMERICAN MACHINE & FOUNDRY**

ALL 4 FREE! Rush Coupon Today!

Your FUTURE in DRAFTING

APTITUDE SAMPLE & TEST LESSON

1 5 Way Drafting Instrument—yours to keep as a FREE GIFT without obligation.
2 20-Pg. Drafting Career Fact Book—packed with details about career opportunities.
3 Self-Scoring Drafting Aptitude Test—tells if you are suited for high pay Drafting Career.
4 Sample Lesson—a "taste preview" of things to come.

COAST-TO-COAST SHORTAGE OF TRAINED DRAFTSMEN Opens Thousands Big Salary Jobs for Beginners!
Now you can take your pick of thousands of big salary jobs open to Draftsmen (see "help wanted" sections of metropolitan newspapers). Huge nationwide demand... U.S. Dept. of Labor reports "42% more Draftsmen needed in next 10 years—not enough applicants to fill drafting jobs available now!" Our easy "Quick-Learn" Method has helped hundreds toward good income, security and prestige as Draftsmen. Why not you?

You Need No Drawing Skill—No Technical Ability
NASD's vast of experienced Draftsmen will show you step-by-step. With our open four home-study plan you work on actual projects. Makes learning fun—easy to remember. Thousands graduates have succeeded with only grade school training. Others report good earnings drafting part time while still students. Book comes faster than... get **FREE "DRAFTING CAREER KIT," Sample Lesson, Drafting Aptitude Test** including interesting new **5-Way Drafting Instrument** and **20 page Book "Your Future as Drafting"**—just-packed with revealing facts on your opportunity to win big pay and job security in Drafting. Everything needed to start **FREE** and **WITHOUT OBLIGATION**. No advance mail cost.

HERE'S WHAT STUDENTS SAY
Earns \$620 Monthly!
"My first position after completing your course earned me income from \$100 to \$620 per month."
—G. W. Tenn.
Big Promotion!
"I was promoted from the production line ahead of 8 others, and got a good pay raise."
—W. A. Wiley.
Gets 50% Raise!
"Shortly after I completed your course I was made chief draftsman. My pay was increased by 50%."
—W. S. New York
No Layoffs!
"Strokes and leads are necessities of the job. Your training has opened the door to a wonderful future for me."
—H. O. Ohio
Authorized to issue diplomas for California Superintendent of Public Instruction.
Approved Member, National Home Study Council.
Never before has so much been taught in so little time. A home-study program in cooperation with Cleveland Engineering Institute.

NORTH AMERICAN SCHOOL OF DRAFTING, Dept. 21014
4500 Campus Dr., University Plaza, Newport, Calif. 92660
Rush "DRAFTING CAREER KIT" including Book, Sample Lesson, Aptitude Test & Drafting Instrument—ALL FREE! No salesman will call.

NAME _____ AGE _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

NORTH AMERICAN SCHOOL OF DRAFTING
4500 Campus Dr., Dept. 21014 University Plaza, Newport, Calif. 92660

Fig. 6

Cage's most physically imposing moment is contrasted with the image of a white man participating in the intellectually based career of architecture.

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